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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the two agencies that distribute U.S. Government publications in the largest number and on the greatest range of subjects: the Government Printing Office (GPO) and the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Similarities and differences in operations are discussed as well as some of the issues surrounding the programs administered by these organizations. (RAO)

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Major U.S. Government Publications Systems: A Summary

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MAJOR U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS SYSTEMS: A SUMMARY

Publications of the U. S. Government are a principal source of information and knowledge for practically every field of endeavor. They are used extensively within the U. S. and throughout the world by small businesses, large corporations, governments, libraries, individual researchers and scientists, and the general public.

Each agency of the U. S. Government is obliged by law to make available, to the public and private sector, the information it gathers and the knowledge it produces. Taken as a whole, the agencies provide authoritative and timely information on almost every conceivable subject and their information is used continually as a reference source for decision-makers, policy-makers, and problem-solvers. Within the past half century, however, the volume and diversity of U. S. Government publications has expanded dramatically challenging the world's ability to organize, retrieve and manipulate them to solve problems.

Because U. S. Government publications have been affected by the information explosion, the manner by which these documents are cataloged, indexed, stored, retrieved, and utilized has become the object of intense study. Many organizations in the public and private sector have interested themselves in the problems caused by this rapid growth. Their aim is to find ways of modifying existing communication mechanisms or creating new ones that can distribute U. S. Government publications, and the information found in them, more widely and with greater relevance thus increasing utilization by more people. At present, most librarians and documentalists working with U. S. Government documents believe the information these documents contain is underutilized.[1]

The U. S. Government has so many information distribution programs that it would be impossible to describe them all in a short paper. For example, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and the U. S. Geological Survey all have important document sales programs, and the Bureau of Census, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Patent and Trademark Office all have library depository programs.[2] Although all these programs are important, this paper will focus on the two agencies which distribute U. S. Government publications in the largest number and on the greatest range of subjects: The Government Printing Office (GPO) and the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) of the U. S. Department of Commerce. Similarities and differences in operations will be discussed, as well as some of the issues surrounding the programs administered by these organizations.

U. S. Government Printing Office

The U. S. Government Printing Office (GPO) is the principal printing agency of the U. S. Government. GPO is part of the Legislative Branch and derives its authority and direction from Congress. Its primary products and services are the printing and distribution of the Congressional Record, the Federal Register, and the weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, as well as about 20,000 new individual titles annually. In addition, important and quick turn-around printing jobs are done within GPO and others are contracted out commercially. GPO printing and binding operations are paid for by direct appropriations or by reimbursements from the Federal agencies requesting printing services.

Within the GPO, the Superintendent of Documents is responsible for:

- Compilation of catalogs and indexes of Government publications
- Distribution of, by-law, publications specifically authorized by law or Congressional Resolution
- Administration of the U. S. Depository Library System
- Sales program which offers popular titles and Federal Subscriptions to domestic and foreign customers

For many years, the GPO sold its publications well below reproduction and distribution costs. However, realistic accounting procedures were introduced during the early 1970's and today's prices more nearly reflect true costs. The GPO has two sales programs: a "general sales program" and a "special sales program." The first program includes those publications which are sold at prices determined by the Public Printer while the second includes those publications whose prices are set by legislation, such as the Congressional Record, the U. S. Government Manual, and the Federal Register.[3] These "special" publications are produced at a substantial loss. In 1975, for example, a subscription to the Congressional Record cost GPO $130 and cost the subscriber $45.[4] In April 1976, the Special Libraries Association sponsored a survey of 700 libraries to determine the effect of GPO price increases; forty percent of those responding said that they acquired fewer publications as a result.[5] Another question asked was, "how do GPO prices compare with commercial prices?" Fifty-nine percent of the respondents reported that GPO prices were still lower than prices of commercial publishers. Some voices[6] continue to call for greater subsidization of U. S. Government publications in order to make them more widely available to the general public.

The GPO also has a "depository library program" which distributes publications free to the depository libraries. The program, which involves more than 1,200 libraries, is funded by direct appropriation from Congress. It costs the Federal government more than 12 million dollars to support the program.

Within this program GPO does prescribe standards which depository libraries are expected to meet, and it does have the authority to withdraw depository privileges from libraries that do not fulfill their responsibilities. To date no depository privilege has been withdrawn because of failure to meet the prescribed standards.[7]

In the last few years, the GPO has taken steps to improve its services to libraries. As a result, the depository program now has a greater chance of being expanded and implemented effectively through libraries.

Beginning with the July 1976 issue of the Monthly Catalog of U. S. Government Publications, GPO has cataloged its documents according to Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and indexed them according to Library of Congress Subject Headings. Since most libraries keep their government publications mostly, or even entirely, separate from other materials and do not normally catalog them, this means that the bibliographic treatment of government publications is now more uniform than it was in the past.

When GPO changed its cataloging practices, it also began inputting its bibliographic records into the Ohio College Library Center (OCLC) system.[8] In 1977 the Library of Congress began to distribute machine-readable computer tapes in MARC format reflecting GPO's cataloging efforts.[9] And by 1978, GPO was undertaking a joint project with the Library of Congres to standardize corporate entries for government bodies.[10] In short, GPO has joined national library automation efforts, at least as far as cataloging is concerned.

So far, no in-depth study has been done to show how libraries are reacting to GPO's new machine-readable cataloging. There are, however, many positive signs. For example, the University of Houston Library has taken to ordering OCLC cards for selected government documents and filing them in the main public card catalog, using the Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs) class number as the call number together with a note directing the user to the documents collection;[11] and, Kent State University Library relies on OCLC completely, using it as an on-line computer utility and document library catalog. Although OCLC was not designed to be used for U. S. Government document cataloging, Kent State's experience proves its ability to satisfy this requirement.[12]

Several years ago, the Joint Committee on Printing (JCP)[13] added micropublishing to the definition of printing in the JCP regulations and authorized the GPO to distribute microfiche to depository libraries in lieu of paper copy. In addition, the JCP authorized GPO to make non GPO publications not previously distributed to the depository libraries available to the depositories in microfiche form.

The advantages of a microform program for libraries are clear. Bernard Fry goes so far as to say that "space problems in many libraries make microforms the only viable approach to a well planned government document/information retrieval system."[14] But there are unresolved problems concerning the relationship between the public and private sector. A number of private firms, most notably the Congressional Information Service, are active now in providing microforms of some U. S. Government publications. The services provided by these organizations are valuable and of nigh quality[15] and in some cases may have features beyond what the U. S. Government has been able to do up to now.[16]

There are also practical problems. A recent survey indicated that many depository libraries do not have microform readers or printers.[17] There is also the matter of continuing user resistance to microform.[18]

National Technical Information Service (NTIS)

Full and open communication of research results among scientists is a practice which dates back to the establishment of the scientific academies in the seventeenth century. The United States has always respected this principle. In recent years, as its research and development efforts reached 40 billion dollars per year, it took steps to guarantee the availability of the scientific and technical knowledge it produces to scientists throughout the world. Even non-scientists have come to regard the information found in U. S. scientific and technical reports as a source of trememdous value for solving societal problems

NTIS, an agency of the U. S. Department of Commerce, was established by Congress to expedite the communication of scientific and technical information developed through Federally sponsored research and development programs. The NTIS mission is to collect research publications containing scientific and technical information produced or funded by Federal, State, and local government sources. To "promote the use of these information products by organizing them for easy access, and by publishing news bulletins and catalogs, by exhibits and speeches, by mail promotion, and by utilizing other public and private mecharisms, such as marketing dealers."[19] NTIS directs its services to private businesses, individuals, universities, Federal agencies, State and local governments, and international customers.

The agency is obligated by statute (15 U.S. Code 1151-1157) to recover its costs and has become self-sustaining. Predecessor organizations were the Office of Technical Services (1946-64), and the Clearinghouse for Federal Scientific and Technical Information (1964-70).

The NTIS report distribution operation is generally referred to as "secondary distribution." "Primary distribution" is normally made by the sponsoring agency using copies reproduced by the performing research activity, either the in-house laboratory or a government research contractor. Primary distribution is normally made by the performing organization without charge and may range from 10 to several hundred copies. The primary distribution makes the research results available quickly to contractors and in-house workers in the field. The NTIS secondary distribution is made to those outside the primary distribution channels, other contractors, other agencies, and the general public.

NTIS typically sells 15 copies of a single report title. Nearly 25% of the titles in the NTIS collection are not requested at all although there is normally some initial automatic microfiche distribution, typically about 40 copies, to NTIS subscribers who have indicated an interest in the subject field of the report. Single copy reproduction on demand using xerographic techniques is more economical than printing for approximately 60% of the NTIS titles for which demand is low. NTIS' printing is usually low cost short-run offset reproduction typically with a 30 copy run.

The reproduction at NTIS involves duplicating from the copy supplied by the contributing agency, occasionally a very poor copy with no better copy available. The resulting product is usually less aesthetically pleasing than the higher quality printing and binding performed on a high volume basis from typeset copy by the GPO.

The prices for NTIS information products reflect the costs of handling the low volume demand per title. Prices are based on the number of pages and represent the average cost of the two reproduction processes used, limited run printing and single copy reproduction. The report prices recover a pro-rata share of acquisition, cataloging, indexing and abstracting costs as well as full reproduction and distribution costs.

When government agencies make their technical reports available, NTIS in turn, catalogs, indexes and abstracts them, keyboards them to its computer, and microfilms the report. The indexes are maintained under computer control and the data base can be accessed by the public either directly or through any one of several commercial computerized bibliographic utilities. After reviewing the computer results, a customer may request a copy of the particular report(s) needed either in microfilm or hard copy. NTIS serves and then bills the customer accordingly.

The NTIS report collection includes reports acquisitioned from the Defense Documentation Center, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department's of Energy, Commerce, and Health, Education and Welfare, and more than 200 other Federal agencies. It makes some one million publications available, none of which is ever out of print. In 1978 it sold nearly six million copies to some 100,000 customers in America and abroad, of which four million were on microfiche. The U. S. has good reason to be proud of NTIS -- it is a model on-demand document retrieval and delivery service. Jirina Cermakova, of Czechoslovakia, speaking of NTIS from an international perspective, has described it this way:

> "World's leading producer country of report literature is the USA. In this country reports are well referenced when resulting from research and development activities performed (or sponsored) by Government agencies or done for these agencies under contract....Obtaining reports from other countries than the USA can be difficult and usually entails long delay." (20)

NTIS' coverage is very board. Its vast data base contains information on almost any conceivable subject. NTIS was founded to provide bibliographic control and physical availability for a class of documents rather than for a subject area; and yet, NTIS is not simply an archive but a publisher whose products are meant to be actively used and to be sold at a price that will recover their cost. In order to meet Congress' requirement that it be self-sustaining, NTIS markets its services agressively through Abstract Newsletters and other means. (21)

NTIS also makes available government-generated machine-readable data products and the related computer software that is available to process the data. There has been a phenomenal increase in both the number and types of machine-readable data bases established by and for the U. S. Government primarily for its own use. At the same time, the many users and potential users are finding that machine-readable data gathered, organized and presented for one purpose can be reorganized and reformatted and used just as effectively for other purposes. They are also finding that a number of data bases, or parts of a number of data bases, can be merged into more comprehensive data bases of great value, that will permit extensive new and different analyses and correlations.

NTIS plans to substantially increase the effort devoted to developing a publicly available machine-readable products and services program over the next several years. Major program objectives include:

- Increasing coverage by NTIS of government machine-readable products

- Providing reference services to all government machine-readable products

- Providing custom reports prepared from government machine-readable data files where appropriate

CONCLUSION

Next November, in Washington, the U. S. will hold its first White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services. Thousands of professional librarians, documentalists and lay people will gather to help set new directions for the year 2000.

One of the main topics certain to be discussed will be the creation of a nationwide network of libraries and information centers that will surely include GPO and NTIS. Even without a national blueprint to follow at the present time, the trend towards such a network in the United States is unmistakable. Information organizations of every type in the public and private sector are taking the initiative to link up and interconnect.

Government publications, because of their importance and value, are certain to be considered by the conferees. In preparation for the Conference, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science commissioned a report by Dean Bernard Fry on the availability and accessibility of government publications in the national program for library and information services. Dr. Fry concludes:

> "It is clear there is general agreement that some form of national depository library is a crucial component in the emerging plans of a national network, and there is also concern that further basic improvements in bibliographic control, availability and accessibility are essential to greater public utilization of government generated information. What is at issue is the total reorientation of government publications at all levels and in all aspects of their issuance, distribution, and accessibility in order to meet the pressing information needs of modern society."(22)

U. S. Government publications constitute a major source of useful information. They provide valuable insights on many topics; vital statistics and facts; unique data of the most timely and authoritative type; and, in addition, they are an invaluable record of U. S. Government activities which no democracy can do without. The major mechanisms in the U. S. for distributing and organizing government publications, while probably the most advanced in modern society, could still be improved, particularly with respect to bibliographic control. Finally, in the future, the new information technology can be expected to influence document systems in many useful and positive ways the least of which is joining them to a worldwide network of libraries and information centers.

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